

Chapter 2

The National Question

Part 1

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Moses Kotane, 1905-1978

Kotane entered the South African political arena at a time when controversy was raging over the nature of the South African revolution and the relationship between the national and class struggles, precipitated by the adoption of the famous 'Native Republic' resolution by the 6th Congress of the Communist International held in Moscow in 1928. To understand the nature of the contribution which Kotane was to make in the coming years, it is necessary to review the arguments which were being hotly debated by the protagonists at the time.

The national question had been discussed by both Marx and Engels in terms of the political situation of their day - a period when capitalism was at its height and about to expand and transform itself into the worldwide complex of imperialism. The early writings of Lenin and Stalin contain dissertations on the national question which view it as one of the phenomena accompanying the development of the capitalist system.

In his 1914 thesis on *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, Lenin wrote:

"Throughout the world the period of the final victory of capitalism over feudalism has been linked up with national movements. For the complete victory of commodity production, the bourgeoisie must capture the home market, and there must be politically united territories whose populations speak a single language, with all obstacles to the development of that language and to its consolidation in literature eliminated. Therein is the economic foundation of national movements

. . . Therefore the tendency of every national movement is towards the formation of *national states*, under which these requirements of capitalism are best satisfied . . . The self-determination of nations means the political separation of these nations from alien national bodies, and the formation of an independent national state."

But what constitutes a nation?

In his famous treatise on *Marxism and the National Question* written in 1913, Stalin said: "A nation is a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture . . . It must be emphasised that none of the above characteristics is by itself sufficient to define a nation. On the other hand, it is sufficient for a single one of these characteristics to be absent and the nation ceases to be a nation."

Stalin also wrote in this same treatise: "It goes without saying that a nation, like every other historical phenomenon, is subject to the law of change, has its history, its beginning and end."

As with nations, so with the theory of national liberation, the Marxist laws of change and development operate. Theory and practice are interrelated and interact upon one another.

"The several demands of democracy, including self-determination, are not an absolute, but only a *small part* of the general-democratic (now: general-socialist) *world* movement. In individual concrete cases, the part may contradict the whole; if so it must be rejected." - Lenin, *On the National Pride of the Great Russians*, 1916.

The Bolshevik Party not only proclaimed the right of nations to self-determination but also put its policies into effect when it came to power in 1917. Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland exercised the right to secession from Russia and became independent states. A number of independent Soviet Republics were created which later joined together to form the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on December 30, 1922, regarding the creation of the U.S.S.R. as the only guarantee that the various peoples who had been colonised and oppressed under the former Tsarist regime would have the freedom and the power to exercise the right to self-determination.

The U.S.S.R. was not imposed on the various nations and national groups by the power of the Russian majority, but was a union voluntarily and freely entered into by the various contracting parties.

As Stalin explained: "Under present international conditions, under the conditions of capitalist encirclement, not a single Soviet republic taken alone can regard itself as secure against economic exhaustion and military destruction on the part of world imperialism.

"Hence, in isolation, the existence of the various Soviet republics is uncertain and unstable, because of the menace to their existence offered by the capitalist states. The joint interests of the Soviet Republics in the matter of defence, in the first place, the restoration of the productive forces shattered during the war, in the second place, and the fact that the Soviet Republics which are rich in food must come to the aid of the Soviet Republics which are poor in food, in the third place, all imperatively dictate the political union of the various Soviet republics as the only means of escaping imperialist bondage and national oppression. Having liberated themselves from their 'own' and 'foreign' bourgeoisie, the national Soviet republics can defend their existence and defeat the combined forces of imperialism only by amalgamating themselves into a close political union, or not at all."⁶

The formation of the Soviet Union by the first All-Union Congress of Soviets on December 30, 1922, was a triumphant vindication of the Marxist theory on the national question, and opened up an era of the many-sided and harmonious development of the Soviet peoples, welding them into a massive force which has transformed the balance of power on a global scale, prised loose the grip of the imperialists and opened the way for the emergence and development of all the formerly subject peoples in all continents of the world.

It is on this theoretical foundation, together with its successful realisation in practice wherever it has been applied, that the South African Communist Party bases its conviction that the national oppression of the black peoples of South Africa can be eliminated and the national aspirations of all section of the people fully realised within the framework of a single, integrated South African state based on non-racialism, democracy and full equality.

Marxist theories on the national question, and in particular the practical experience of the Soviet Union in applying those theories, were of special significance for South Africa, with its racially mixed population. In 1921, the year of the foundation of the Communist Party of South Africa, the population total was revealed by the census taken that year to be 6,927,000, comprising 1,521,000 Whites, 4,697,000 Africans, 525,000 Coloureds and 164,000 Asians. With the exception of a few thousand blacks

mainly in the Cape but including also a handful in Natal, who fulfilled the educational and financial requirements of the constitution and had gone through the often troublesome process of registering on the voters' roll, the franchise was the monopoly of the whites, who alone exercised effective power. Thus the South African situation was not the same as that in the Soviet Union, where the Great Russian majority had to take into account the aspirations of a variety of smaller nations and national groups. In South Africa, by contrast, the problem which confronted the socialist movement from the outset was how to smash the colour bar, which both by law and custom effectively prevented the black majority from exercising any democratic rights, acquiring education and skills, enjoying equal rights and opportunities and sharing equally the benefits of the economic development of the country. By the Land Acts of 1913 and 1936 the Africans were even forbidden to own or acquire land in 87 per cent of the land area of the country; and restriction on access to the land was extended to Coloureds and Asians by the Group Areas Act of 1950 passed after the Nationalist Government came to power in 1948.

Black political organisations existed before the socialist movement came into being. The Natal Indian Congress was formed by Gandhi in 1894, the African Political Organisation (APO) in 1902, the National Congress (later renamed the African National Congress) in 1912; and there were other bodies. But most of these were sectional in their approach, lacking in both ideology and strategy, with a purview which did not extend beyond the immediate interests of the group for whom they spoke. The African National Congress (as we shall refer to it hereafter) did not even have a constitution until 1919, the first draft having been rejected by the annual conference of 1915. In its early years, the ANC shrank from demanding full equality for all the peoples of South Africa, and perhaps its greatest achievement was that it set out to unite all sections of the African people, it rejected tribal or ethnic division, and it proposed to take action. - at that time essentially non-violent - to promote the interests of the African people and obtain redress for their grievances. Though it undoubtedly stimulated African national consciousness, its approach was reformist and gradualist .

It was not until socialist organisations emerged in South Africa that it was possible to apply in practice the ideology of Marxism to the solution of the national problem. And here it is important to bear in mind the fact that these organisations did not spring into life fully fashioned with theory and practice to match the needs of the time. The most important of them, the International Socialist League, was formed in 1915 when a section of the white Labour Party broke away from the parent body over the issue of the war. Not all the members of the ISL were Marxists; not all of them indeed were international socialists; many of them thought of socialism only in terms of the white workers who, they thought, must constitute the vanguard of the socialist revolution in South Africa.

The more far-sighted of the members of the International Socialist League realised that socialism for South Africa could not be restricted to the whites but must include all races. In October 1915 the first secretary of the ISL, David Ivon Jones, wrote in an article in *The International* on the 'Parting of the Ways': "An internationalism which does not concede the fullest rights which the Native working class is capable of claiming will be a sham. One of the justifications for our withdrawal from the Labour Party is that it gives us untrammelled freedom to deal, regardless of political fortunes, with the great and fascinating problem of the native. If the League deal resolutely in consonance with Socialist principles with the native question, it will succeed in shaking South African capitalism to its foundations. Then and not till then, shall we be able to talk about the South African Proletariat in our International relations. Not till we free the native can we hope to free the white . . ."

Two months later Jones returned to the subject again in the *International*: "Slaves to a higher oligarchy, the white workers of South Africa themselves in turn batten on a lower slave class, the native races. Himself kicked by his Capitalist masters, the 'correct' and accepted attitude towards the 'nigger' is to kick him, to, teach him his place, and to stand no impudence (meaning 'independence'). Gingerly attempts to show him that in the extension of freedom for the native lies the only salvation of the white worker invariably aroused storms of execration. And thus has the South African Labour movement grown up, more intolerant towards the native slave than any working class in the world, and consequently more parasitical than any other. To such a movement, talk of the international unity of the working class could never arouse sincere response among a rank and file so placed . . . Can we talk of the cause of the Workers in which the cries of the most despairing and the claims of the most enslaved are spurned and disregarded . . . The new movement will break the bounds of Craft and race and sex . . . It will be wide as humanity . . ."

Another who early advanced the claims of the black workers was S.P. Bunting, who in the issue of the *International* of February 18, 1916, wrote an article headed: "Workers of the World Unite" in which he declared: "The solidarity of Labour fails the moment it is divided on colour, race. . . or creed . . ."

The Labour Party and the trade union movement with which it was associated consisted almost entirely of white workers. So did the ISL when it first came into existence. When Jones spoke of the "we" and the "us", who were now free to deal with "the great and fascinating problem of the Native", he was thinking in terms of "we white socialists" and. he was still reflecting the prevailing white attitude that the Africans constituted a "problem". This was because up to this time in South African history there was hardly any record of black political industrial or working class organisation or action within the framework of the modern sector of the economy

which had made any impact on (white) public opinion. In the beginning the ISL had no black members.

There was a tug of war inside the ISL between those who saw the need for pioneer socialist work amongst the black workers, and those who felt the only way forward was to convert more white workers to their way of thinking. At the first national conference of the ISL in Johannesburg on January 9, 1916, a "petition of rights" for the African worker was introduced by Bunting, who moved: "That this League affirm that the emancipation of the working class requires the abolition of all forms of Native indenture, compound and passport systems; and the lifting of the Native worker to the political and industrial status of the white."

In his biography of S.P. Bunting, Edward Roux writes: "This did not meet with the unanimous support of the conference. No one openly expressed race prejudice or denied that the black man was entitled to freedom. But there was an attempt to avoid a specific Native programme by asserting that 'there was no Native problem, only a worker's problem'. An amendment by Dunbar to this effect was lost. Colin Wade then got the last part of the motion changed to read 'and the lifting of the Native wage worker to the political and industrial status of the white; meanwhile endeavouring to prevent the increase (in numbers) of the Native wage workers, and to assist the existing Native wage workers to free themselves from the wage system'." Though the motion was passed, there was a minority of members who were doubtful of the place the black worker should occupy in what they (the minority), consciously or unconsciously, accepted would continue to be a white dominated society.¹¹

But above all, absent from the thinking of even the majority in the ISL was any thought of the independent contribution that could be made by the blacks to their own liberation or the creation of a socialist South Africa. The motion, as passed, does not even aim at black liberation as such, but only at the emancipation of the working class, in the ranks of whom the blacks were seen to be a minority. There was no hint in the resolution that the black millions could be recruited as allies of the white socialists in their fight for the new socialist order. Nor was there reflected in the motion any understanding of the way in which the economic and social structure of South Africa was being transformed by the destruction of the tribal way of life and the drawing into the ranks of wage labourers of millions upon millions of blacks who could no longer live off the land.

Marxist thinking on the national question had not yet reached South Africa. And the lack of ideological clarity on the national question meant that the pioneer socialists were confronted with an apparent contradiction. On the one hand, as Jones had pointed out, the racial attitudes of the white workers, an aristocracy of labour,

meant that "talk of the international unity of the working class could never arouse sincere response". On the other hand, orthodox socialist theory, as expressed by ISL Chairman W.H. (Bill) Andrews in his 1917 Provincial Council manifesto, declared that it was "the imperative duty of the white workers to recognise their identity of interest with the native worker as against their common masters . . . It is time for the white workers to deal with the native as a man and a fellow worker and not as a chattel slave or serf. Only that way lies freedom and justice for all."

This contradiction was to remain embedded in socialist thinking for many years to come, and echoes of it are to be heard even today. Do black and white workers have a common class base and common interests? Does the struggle for national liberation conflict with the struggle for socialism? Can true equality for black and white be achieved short of the establishment of socialism and the abolition of class conflict? Who has not heard the sincere African patriot who says: "We have the ANC, why do we also need a Communist Party?" Must the struggle for socialism pass through two stages: 1. the bourgeois-democratic revolution which will end the colour bar, and 2; the socialist revolution which will end all inequality, whether based on race or class?

The ISL may have lacked an adequate theory on the national question, but it moved in the right direction. It made contact with the black masses, sought co-operation with the ANC and, later, with the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU); it brought black and white together on the same platform and in various forms of political action; it formed the first industrial African trade union, the Industrial Workers of Africa in 1917. Step by step it moved forward 'towards a clearer appreciation of the true nature of the problem which it had to tackle, and it is a tribute to its leaders and the majority of its members that, isolated as they were at the southernmost tip of Africa, their thinking as socialists kept pace with that at the revolutionary fountain-heads in Europe. They welcomed the Russian revolution of 1917 and when the Comintern was formed they hastened to apply for affiliation. At the January 1921 conference of the ISL a resolution outlining the nature of work to be done among the Coloured and Native workers, introduced by Bunting, specifically requested support for "bourgeois democratic liberation movements" among non-whites and backed their demand for the vote, the right to organise, equal civil 'rights and the abolition of all discriminatory legislation such as the pass laws, special taxes and restrictive labour practices.

Yet in his reply on behalf of the ISL to the Comintern, *Communism in South Africa*, only a few months later (it was dated March 29, 1921), Ivon Jones referred disparagingly to the ANC as a "small coterie of educated natives . . . satisfied with agitation for civil equality and political rights", and contrasted them unfavourably with the Industrial Workers of Africa, despite the fact that this organisation at that

stage existed only on paper. Jones' report predicted that "the growing class organisations of the natives will soon dominate or displace the Congress" an erroneous calculation which was to be duplicated during the next decade in the Communist Party's relationship with the ICU, which the Party believed would outlast the ANC.

In July 1921 the ISL joined with a number of other organisations to form the Communist Party of South Africa, which became the South African affiliate of the Third International. In the six years of their existence as a separate organisation, the South African socialists had made tremendous strides. Yet still there was something missing. Although some black organisations had taken part in preliminary discussions earlier in the year, they were not represented and there were no black delegates present at the 'foundation conference of the CPSA, and the manifesto adopted by the conference failed to identify the national question as a distinct item. Indeed the fight for equal rights is barely referred to except by implication as an ingredient in the fight for socialism.

"For the immediate future", states the manifesto, "the main duty of the party and of every member of it is to establish the widest and closest possible contact with workers of all *ranks and races* and to propagate the Communist gospel amongst them, in the first instance among the industrial masses, who must provide the 'storm. troops' of the revolution, and secondly among the rural toilers. Even that path will not be smooth. Immediate repression in the form of raids, prosecutions, mob attacks and bloodshed by 'Black (and Tan) Hundreds' or '*White Guards*' may be looked for as the propaganda is seen to be working among the submissive *helot races whose enlightenment and organisation the ruling class dreads above all*. The Communists will therefore proceed neither timorously nor tactlessly, losing no opportunity of demonstrating that, inasmuch as the cheap docile labour is what attracts the world capitalist investor to South Africa, so its understanding of and conscious entry into the working class movement is the most deadly blow South Africa can deal to world capitalism.

"But propaganda 'is not enough' in these days of rapid change and action, and the party will be alert to turn to the advantage of the Labour Movement wherever possible any phase of discontent or disaffection, any opposition to imperialism, any indignation at the accepted 'skiet skiet' [shoot shoot] native policy, any genuine revolt of the masses against tyranny; striving always to hasten, sharpen and shorten the inevitable conflict, to guide and inspire the struggling workers in times of stress and trial like the present, and generally to act as the revolutionary vanguard of the Labour army of South Africa."

The international Communist movement, in a better position to assess

developments throughout the colonial world, and after the Russian revolution learning many valuable lessons from the practical experience of the Communist Party in solving the national question in its own territory, began to appreciate the anti-imperialist, revolutionary potential of the national struggle in the colonial countries. In his "Report on the Tactics of the Russian Communist Party" presented to the 3rd Congress of the Communist International on July 5, 1921, Lenin, contesting the conventional view of the Second International that the national movement was of secondary importance, wrote: "But this is not so. It has undergone great change since the beginning of the twentieth century. Millions and hundreds of millions, in fact the overwhelming majority of the population of the globe, are now coming forward as independent, active and revolutionary factors. It is perfectly clear that in the impending decisive battles in the world revolution, the movement of; the population of the globe, Initially directed towards national liberation, will turn against capitalism and imperialism and will perhaps play a much more revolutionary part than we expect."

Few white socialists saw this at the time. The great class struggles of the early decades of the 20th Century in South Africa had for the most part been waged by the white working class and their unions for recognition, for status, for higher wages and better conditions, against the ruthless rapacity of the mining and financial bosses backed by the force of government. The greatest struggle was still to come - the mine strike of 1922 - in which the white workers directly challenged the power of the Chamber of Mines and the State. Hundreds of white workers gave their lives in these struggles, and there can be no denying their revolutionary content. After all, it was precisely in the crucible of these intense class conflicts that the South African socialist movement as represented in the ISL and the CPSA was forged.

By contrast, the latent power of the oppressed black peoples was yet to be manifested. True, tens of thousands of Africans had been involved in strike action from time to time. The last fierce battle of the Zulus against the white invaders had taken place at the beginning of the century. There were frequent clashes between black and white, and blacks and the police. But for a variety of reasons these struggles had not yet given birth to stable and powerful organisations capable of harnessing black power. The black national organisations were unable, like the white bodies, to use the vote to influence government policy. The African workers were unable to build strong unions because of the operation of the migratory labour policy and the pass laws which kept the black population perpetually on the move.

Thus many sincere white socialists, while accepting the principle of equal rights for all - and this both the ISL and the CPSA were committed to, from the outset did not see work amongst the blacks as a realistic alternative to work among the whites. The white unions, the Labour Party - these were visible and concrete, and when (with the

assistance of the Nationalist Party) they broke the Smuts Government in 1924, no government from that day onwards was ever able to ignore them. But the black national organisations, the ANC, the first African trade unions - these were seen either as bourgeois and reformist organisations lacking a mass base, eschewing the path of militant struggle and working instead by way of appeals, petitions and deputations; or as transient and ephemeral bodies without substance, whose officials as often as not ran off with all the funds.

In his 1921 report to the Comintern on *Communism in South Africa* already referred to, Ivon Jones put it as follows: "Owing to the heavy social disabilities and political backwardness the natives are not able to supply any active militants to the Communist movement. The immediate needs of white trade unionism, in which a number of our members are actively engaged, tends to throw the more difficult task of native emancipation into the background. The white movement dominates our attention, because the native workers' movement moves only spasmodically, and is neglected. It requires a special department, with native linguists and newspapers. All of which require large funds, which are not available."

A change in the attitude of the South African Communist Party was brought about as a result of two interrelated factors. One was the Party's own experience in South Africa, the steady increase of black membership and influence in its ranks, the deepening co-operation of the Party with black organisations of various kinds, the growth in militancy and maturity of the black organisations themselves reflecting the ever-increasing absorption of black labour in the modern sector of the economy. The second factor was the influence exerted on the South African Party by Comintern thinking and experience in relation to the national question and, in the late twenties and early thirties, the specific interchanges between the Comintern and the South African Communist Party on the way in which the national question should be tackled in South Africa.

The national question featured prominently on the agenda of the Second Comintern congress which opened in Petrograd on July 17, 1920, and continued in Moscow from July 23 to August 7.

The Congress adopted a number of theses on the national and colonial question drafted by Lenin but also incorporating supplementary theses comprising an amended version of theses submitted by the Indian delegate Roy. Lenin pointed out, in his report of the commission on the National and Colonial Question delivered on June 26, that "the vast majority of the world's population, over 1,000 million, perhaps even 1,250 million, if we take the total population of the world as 1750 million, in other words, about 70 per cent of the world's population, belong to the oppressed nations." The enormous revolutionary potential of these millions was

acknowledged when the congress decided to substitute the term "national--revolutionary" for the term "bourgeois-democratic" which had previously been used to define the nature of the national movement.

"The significance of this change", said Lenin, "is that we as Communists, should and will support bourgeois liberation movements in the colonies only when they are genuinely revolutionary, and when their exponents do not hinder our work of educating and organising in a revolutionary spirit the peasantry and the masses of the exploited".

Another point stressed by Lenin in this same speech was that, thanks to the existence of Soviet power, it was no longer correct to assume that "the development of capitalist economy is inevitable in those backward countries which are now liberating themselves and in which progressive movements have been started since the war... With the assistance of the proletariat of the advanced countries, the backward nations can arrive to the Soviet form of organisation and through certain stages pass on to Communism, obviating the capitalist stage."

Lenin's basic thesis as accepted by the congress stated the essential distinction between bourgeois and proletarian democracy in relation to the national movement: "An abstract or formal posing of the problem of equality in general and national equality in particular is in the very nature' of bourgeois democracy. Under the guise of the equality of the individual in general, bourgeois democracy proclaims the formal or legal equality of the property-owner and the proletarian, the exploiter and the exploited, thereby grossly deceiving the oppressed classes. On the plea that all men are absolutely equal, the bourgeoisie is transforming the idea of equality, which is itself a reflection of relations in commodity production, into a weapon in its struggle against the abolition of classes. The real meaning of the demand for equality consists in its being a demand for the abolition of classes."

In other words, there can be no true national equality until class division is ended; only socialism can create the conditions in which national division and race discrimination can be abolished. Nevertheless, the forces working for the national democratic revolution and those working for socialism can, in certain circumstances, co-operate.

Point 4 of the theses on the national question set out the perspectives of the movement as follows: "The policy of the Communist International on the National and Colonial questions must be chiefly to bring about a union of the proletarian and working masses of all nations and countries for a joint revolutionary struggle leading to the overthrow of capitalism, without which national equality and oppression cannot be abolished."

The theses distinguished sharply between proletarian internationalism and petty-bourgeois nationalism. Point 10 of the theses declares: "Petty-bourgeois nationalism proclaims as internationalism the mere recognition of the equality of nations, and nothing more. Quite apart from the fact that this recognition is purely verbal, petty-bourgeois nationalism preserves national self-interest intact, whereas proletarian internationalism demands, first, that the interests of the proletarian struggle in any one country should be subordinated to the interests of that struggle on a worldwide scale, and, second, that a nation which has achieved victory over the bourgeoisie should be able and willing to make the greatest national sacrifices for the overthrow of international capital."

Point 11 places upon the Communist Parties of all countries the responsibility of assisting the bourgeois-democratic liberation movement in the more backward countries, and of establishing the closest possible alliance between the Communist parties of the metropolitan countries and the revolutionary peasant movements in the colonies and backward countries. And, with profound foresight, warns: "It is likewise necessary to wage determined war against the attempts of quasi-revolutionists to cloak the bourgeois-democratic liberation movement in the backward countries with a communist garb . . . The Communist International must enter into a temporary alliance with bourgeois democracy in the colonial and backward countries, but should not merge with it, and should under all circumstances uphold the independence of the proletarian movement even if in its most embryonic form."

The same section also foresaw the development of neo-colonialism, and urged the need constantly to explain and expose among the broadest working masses of all countries, and particularly of the backward countries, the deception systematically practised by the imperialist powers which, under the guise of politically independent states, set up states that are wholly dependent upon them economically, financially and militarily"

To the original theses which had been drafted by Lenin were added a number of supplementary theses submitted by the Indian Communist Roy and accepted, after amendment, by the second congress of the Comintern. Roy's theses emerged from the experience of Indian Communists in the liberation movement. In one sense they enriched the thinking of the Comintern on the national question, but to some extent they also introduced an element of confusion. Roy's main argument was that the breaking up of the colonial empire, together with the proletarian revolution in the metropolitan country, would overthrow the capitalist system in Europe. Roy's point six, as accepted by the congress, stated: "Foreign domination has obstructed the free development of the social forces, therefore its overthrow is the first step towards a

revolution in the colonies. So to help overthrow the foreign rule in the colonies is not to endorse the nationalist aspirations of the native bourgeoisie, but to open the way to the smothered proletariat there,"

Roy's point 7 (also as accepted by congress) added:

'There are to be found in the dependent countries two distinct movements, which every day grow farther apart from each other. One is the democratic nationalist movement, with a programme of political independence under the bourgeois order, and the other is the mass action of the poor and ignorant peasants and workers for their liberation from all sorts of exploitation. The former endeavour to control the latter, and often succeed to a certain extent, but the Communist International and the (communist) parties affected must struggle against such control and help to develop class consciousness in the working masses of the colonies. For the overthrow of foreign capitalism which is the first step towards revolution in the colonies, the co-operation of the bourgeois nationalist revolutionary elements is useful. But the foremost and necessary task is the formation of Communist Parties which will organise the peasants and workers and lead them to the revolution and to the establishment of Soviet Republics. Thus the masses of the backward countries may reach communism, not through capitalistic development; but led by the class conscious proletariat of the advanced capitalist countries."

Roy's theses were based on the experience of the colonial countries which bulked largest in the thinking of the Comintern - India, China, Indonesia, Northern Africa and the Middle East, Latin America. In all these countries the national bourgeoisie had developed far further than in South Africa and most other African countries, and the nature and composition of the national liberation organisations was also different. Roy's thesis that the movement of the national bourgeoisie was every day growing further apart from that of the workers and peasants did not, for example, apply to South Africa, where the very development of a national bourgeoisie was frustrated by the laws of the dominant white racists; and as the apartheid laws were piled on top of one another, the incipient black bourgeoisie were more and more thrown back into the arms of the worker and peasant masses whose deprivation and disabilities they were forced to share.

But the 2nd Congress theses left other issues unclear. Was the national revolution to be led by the organisations of the oppressed peoples themselves - both the bourgeois national democratic and the proletarian bodies - or by the proletarian organisations of the metropolitan countries, or by all acting in collaboration? And who was to provide the leadership? Which was the main force of the national revolution? Further, was it a one-stage or a two-stage revolution? At what stage did proletarian co-operation with the national bourgeoisie degenerate into capitulation

or tailism?

The theses on the national question remained basically unaltered until the sixth congress of the Comintern in 1928, when an additional "Thesis on the Revolutionary Movement in the Colonies and Semi-Colonies" was adopted, based on the experience of the international communist movement in the intervening years.

In South Africa, the Communist Party made slow progress after its formation in 1921. The early years were dominated by the 1922 strike and its aftermath, which kept the attention of the Party focussed on the problems of the white workers. Even this strike, however, revolved around the role and status of the black workers, and the Party found itself on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand it felt obliged, as it stated in a manifesto published in the *International* on February 3, 1922, to "offer its assistance to the Strike Committee", although it stressed that it did this "without necessarily identifying itself with every slogan heard in this strike". On the other hand, the colour-bar content of the strike violated the Party's basic policy of equal rights for all, and the Buntingite wing of the Party especially felt it necessary to defend the black workers from actual or threatened attack and argued the right of the black workers to attain equal pay and status with the whites. The pages of the *International* reflected this ideological confusion. The strike found the Communist Party theoretically ill-equipped to sort out the tangled issues of principle; but it was at the same time a powerful educator which brought the Party face to face with the need to formulate a clearer line on the issues of race and class.

During this period only one African of note, T.W. Thibedi - a veteran from the days of the International Socialist League - was to be found active in the ranks of the Communist Party.

In his report back from the 4th Congress of the Comintern held in Moscow in 1922, Bunting indicated something of the stimulus it had given him, reinforcing his own ideas on the way the movement should develop in South Africa. "An all-negro liberation or anti-imperialist movement throughout the world", he wrote, "may well be more potent for the victory of our common cause than anything our mere handful of white workers as such in South Africa can accomplish, and it is time we realised it and it is also time we acted up to our professions regarding the organisation of the native workers; we always say it must be done, but we haven't done it. Our hesitation or passivity in this respect is partly a relic of our Second International origin. As a Communist Party we are not out merely to make new party members or even 'conscientious objectors to the capitalist system', but to mobilise all available forces against capitalism and imperialism, all races of workers, all oppressed peoples".

And he added significantly in the light of later controversies: "The actual work of organising and propaganda on a wide scale among the Non-Europeans must be carried out chiefly by Non-European associations, unions and organisers: in particular they alone can reach the rural proletariat and peasantry whose support in every country is emphasised by the (Communist International) Congress as indispensable".

The harder he and his supporters pressed for work to be carried out among the blacks; the more protests came from the "relics of the Second International" who still retained their membership of the Communist Party. Typical was a letter from the veteran trade unionist Harry Haynes read out at a meeting of the Central Executive of the Communist Party in Johannesburg on December 14, 1923, voicing his emphatic objection to the "native policy" of the party being forced down the throats of the white workers. Haynes proposed that the Communist Party should dissolve itself and its members join the South African Labour Party as individuals, as he himself proposed to do.

Years later, at a meeting of the Party's Central Executive in Johannesburg on July 7, 1927, the Party's leading trade union figure W.H. Andrews reported that the attitude of the white workers had not advanced much.

"The Amalgamated Engineering Union", he said, "the biggest union in the South African Trades Union Congress [of which Andrews was secretary] had seceded on the ground of the alleged hobnobbing of the SATUC with the native labour movement and 'communist influence', and the SATUC had to be very careful to avoid a general stampede. The white trade union movement in South Africa will not co-operate with the natives". (It is a melancholy reflection on the slowness of white attitudes to change that 30 years later, in 1966, the AEU seceded from the Trade Union Congress of South Africa (TUCSA) on roughly similar grounds.)

At the 3rd congress of the Party in Johannesburg in December, 1924, all the delegates present were white, though three Africans described in the minutes as "visitors" representing the ICU addressed the conference - T. Mbeki, J.M.K. Sibella and Silwana. Mbeki and Silwana were members of the Young Communist League and later active members of the CP, but the reports to the 1924 congress stressed the difficulty the Party had experienced in attracting African members and establishing enduring contact with African organisations.

Resolutions passed at the conference, however, brought about a pronounced change of direction in party policy away from the white workers and towards the blacks. The main resolution passed by the conference was *not* to apply to the Labour Party for affiliation, as it had done regularly in the past with a view to securing a united

front of the working class. The resolution passed at the congress suggested that such a united front could not be built from the top, but must come from mass action at rank and file level. The Party, said the resolution, "stresses the prime importance of mass organisation of labour . . . It aims at forwarding the industrial organisation of ALL sections of the workers, especially those hitherto unorganised . . . the problems of the working class can only be solved by a United Front of all workers irrespective of colour"

Introducing a report on "Native Affairs" at the congress on December 28, trade unionist W. Kalk said: "The Communist Party must recognise the necessity of supporting every form of native movement which tends to undermine or weaken capitalism and imperialism, and must fight for race equality of the natives on the economic and political field. The Communist Party must use every instrument which will induce the trade unions to admit native workers. Failing this, it must organise the natives into unions of their own, and apply United Front tactics

Edward Roux, a leading light in the Young Communist League, presented a supplementary report most of which was devoted to a discussion of the ICU, which he described as the "most important factor for the Communist Party in the present situation".

Roux added: "The Communist Party has a very definite function to perform in this connection. We have to fight nationalism just as relentlessly among the natives as among the whites. That means that, while preserving all the revolutionary spirit of the national movement, we must seek to guide the native workers into the labour movement i.e. into contact with the white workers politically and industrially".

In his speech, Silwana commented that the task of the Communist Party was a difficult one. "The CP has got to prove to the masses that it is differentThe natives look upon the whites as one class and their enemies".

The Communist Party, as was to be the case often enough in future, came under fire from the side of both the black and the white nationalists, though obviously not for the same reason.

Chapter 2

The National Question

Part 2

Pages 17-32



Moses Kotane, 1905-1978

Following the conference, however, the Africanisation of the Party was speeded up. Black party members were recruited in greater numbers and played an active role in existing organisations like the ICU (until Communists were expelled from the organisation in 1926), and the African National Congress. The Party started an African night school in Johannesburg, founded a number of African trade unions. Slowly the racial complexion of the Party began to change.

It was not all plain sailing. In the period during and after the second world war, the idea of multi-racialism, of blacks and whites meeting and discussing together,

belonging to the same organisations, became more widespread, if still anathema to the majority of whites, especially those in government. But in the twenties, the Communist Party was pioneering, breaking new, ground, frightening even some of its own members with its audacity. At the 4th Party congress held in Cape Town in December 1925, the same W. Kalk who had at the previous conference demanded that the Party fight for equal rights for blacks, complained that some people were pushing things too far. Speaking in the session held on Christmas Day, December 25, he protested: "Comrade Roux should not say at public meetings in Johannesburg that natives should walk on the pavements, etc. That is what causes trouble at the meetings".

The majority of conference delegates, however, stuck to their guns. For the first time, a Communist Party conference was attended by a number of black delegates - J. Gomas, E.J. Khaile, P. de Norman - and for the first time a black was elected to the Party's Central Executive - the veteran T.W. Thibedi, who had been the main African activist for so many years in the Communist Party and before that in the ISL. He was followed in 1926 by J.A. la Guma, Gana Makabeni and J. Phahlane, while Jacob Tjelele was elected to the Central Executive in 1927. On June 21st, 1926, the Central Executive decided that articles in the African languages should be published in the Party paper, now named the *South African Worker*, though at the same meeting it was decided, after a long discussion, that the time was not ripe to appoint an African organiser.

Nevertheless, the Party was getting its roots down.

At the sixth congress of the Comintern in Moscow in August 1928, Bunting was able to inform the delegates that the Party then had 1,750 members, of whom 1,600 were Africans as against 200 a year before, "though", he added, "so far the effectiveness, the 'specific gravity' as it were, *per head* remains greater among the white members; thus the central executive of the Party, for example, contains only 3 or 4 native members out of a total of 13 simply for want of more efficient native comrades available *as yet*. Responsibility and initiative are not yet highly enough developed among most of our native membership, and some of our principal energies have for several years been devoted to the effort to develop them."

There were some among the Party membership who felt that the failure of the blacks to pass the "specific gravity" test flowed not from their inadequacy but from the wrong policy pursued by the Party on the national question. One such was James la Guma, a Coloured Party leader from Cape Town who, together with ANC leader J.T. Gumede and TUC representative Daniel Colrairie attended the February 1927 congress of the League against Imperialism in Brussels. Gumede had told the Brussels conference: "I am happy to say that there are Communists in South Africa. I

myself am not one, but it is my experience that the, Communist Party is the only party that stands behind us and from which we can expect something".

Shortly after his return, at the ANC conference which opened at Bloemfontein on July 28, 1927, Gumede expressed his opposition to the expulsion of the Communists from the ICU, and pointed out "that of all the political parties in the country, the Communist Party was the only one which honestly and sincerely fought for the emancipation of the oppressed natives". The conference endorsed his report of the Brussels conference proceedings, elected Gumede its new President-General and, for good measure, elected E.J. Khaile, a CP member who had been expelled from the ICU in terms of Kadalie's anti-Communist policy, as ANC general secretary. CP relationships with the ICU might be strained, but with the ANC at this period they were cordial, especially in the Cape, where in 1927 la Guma and Gomas were elected respectively secretary and chairman of the local ANC branch.

Later in the year la Guma and Gumede were invited to visit the Soviet Union, where la Guma had discussions with Bukharin and other members of the Comintern Executive in Moscow.

On his return to South Africa Gumede proclaimed of his visit to the Soviet Union: "I have seen the new world to come, where it has already begun. I have been to the new Jerusalem". On February 27, 1928, he attended a meeting of the Central Executive of the Communist Party by special invitation and reported on his visit to the Soviet Union. Though he never joined the Party, his close collaboration with it was to provoke the antagonism of the more conservative elements in the ANC who finally brought about his defeat in the election for President at the 1930 ANC conference.

On March 15, 1928, just over two weeks after they had listened to Gumede's enthusiastic report, the Party's Central Executive heard a report of a somewhat different nature from la Guma, who had spent some days in Cape Town before following Gumede to Johannesburg. The minutes of the meeting report la Guma as stressing that "Bukharin had said that the white workers in South Africa, soaked as they were with imperialist ideology, were not of primary revolutionary importance in this country"

This same CEC meeting had under discussion a draft "Resolution on the South African Question" drawn up by the Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI) in preparation for the sixth congress of the CI held in Moscow in August and September 1928. The draft contained many of the ideas placed before the ECCI by la Guma when he was in Moscow.

The main "Thesis on the Revolutionary Movement in the Colonies and Semi-Colonies" adopted by the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International dealt with South Africa only in passing, devoting most of its attention to the world picture as a whole. Emphasising that the theses on the national and colonial questions drawn up by Lenin and adopted at the second congress were still valid and should serve as a guiding line for the further work of the Communist Parties, the 6th congress declared that since the second congress, "the actual significance of the colonies and semi-colonies, as factors of crisis in the imperialist world system, has vastly increased . . . the vast colonial and semi-colonial world has become an unquenchable blazing furnace of the revolutionary mass movement.

"The establishment of a fighting front between the active forces of the socialist world revolution (the Soviet Union and the revolutionary Labour movement in the capitalist countries) on the one side, and the forces of imperialism on the other side, is of *fundamental importance* in the present epoch of world history. The toiling masses of the colonies struggling against imperialist slavery represent a most powerful auxiliary force of the socialist world revolution. The colonial countries at the present time constitute for world imperialism the most dangerous sector of their front".

The resolution repeated the judgment of the second congress that "the alliance with the USSR and with the revolutionary proletariat of the imperialist countries creates for the toiling masses of the people of China, India and all other colonial and semi-colonial countries, the possibility of an independent, free, economic and cultural development, *avoiding the stage of the domination of the capitalist system* or even the development of capitalist relations in general."

South Africa in this resolution was grouped with three other areas under the general heading "The Negro Question", the other three being 1. the United States and some South American countries in which the compact negro masses constitute a minority in relation to the white population; 2 the negro states which are actually colonies or semi-colonies of imperialism (Liberia, Haiti, San Domingo); 3. the whole of Central Africa divided into the colonies and mandated territories of the various imperialist powers.

The entire section on South Africa, a single paragraph in a 63-page document (and even this paragraph was missing from the first draft), read as follows: "In the Union of South Africa, the negro masses, which constitute the majority of the population, are being expropriated from the land by the white colonists and by the State, are deprived of political rights and of the right of freedom of movement, are subjected to most brutal forms of racial and class oppression, and suffer simultaneously from pre-capitalist and capitalist methods of exploitation and oppression. The Communist

Party which has already achieved definite successes among the negro proletariat, has the duty of continuing still more energetically the struggle for complete equality of rights for the negroes, for the abolition of all special regulations and laws directed against negroes, and for confiscation of the land of the landlords. In drawing into its organisation non-negro workers, organising them in trade unions, and in carrying on a struggle for the acceptance of negroes by 'the trade unions of white workers, the Communist Party has the obligation to struggle by all methods against every racial prejudice in the ranks of the white workers and to eradicate entirely such prejudices from its own ranks. The Party must determinedly and consistently put forward the slogan for the creation of an independent native republic, with simultaneous guarantees for the rights of the white minority, and struggle in *deeds* for its realisation. In proportion as the development of capitalist relationships disintegrates the tribal structure, the Party must strengthen its work in the education in class-consciousness of the exploited strata of the negro population, and co-operate in their liberation from the influence of the exploiting tribal strata, which become more and more agents of imperialism

This was not the resolution discussed at the meeting of the CEC of the South African Party on March 15, 1928. That was a much longer document discussing in detail the situation in South Africa and setting out the tasks confronting the Party. This special resolution on South Africa stated, inter alia: "The Party must orientate itself chiefly upon the native toiling masses while continuing to work actively among the white workers. The Party leadership must be developed in the same sense. This can only be achieved by bringing the native membership without delay into much more active leadership of the Party both locally and centrally.

"While developing and strengthening the fight against all the customs, laws and regulations which discriminate against the native and coloured population in favour of the white population, the Communist Party of South Africa must combine the fight against all anti-native laws with the general political slogan in the fight against British domination, the slogan of an independent native South African republic as a stage towards a workers' and peasants' republic, with full equal rights for all races, black, coloured and white.

"South Africa is a black country, the majority of its population is black and so is the majority of the workers and peasants. The bulk of the South African population is the black peasantry, whose land has been expropriated by the white minority. Seven eighths of the land is owned by the whites. Hence the national question in South Africa, which is based upon the agrarian question, lies at the foundation of the revolution in South Africa. The black peasantry constitutes the basic moving force of the revolution in alliance with and under the leadership of the working class."

The resolution also stated that "the Party should pay particular attention to The embryonic organisations among the natives, such as The African National Congress. The Party, while retaining its full independence, should participate in these organisations, should seek to broaden and extend their activity. Our aim should be to transform the African National Congress into a fighting nationalist revolutionary organisation against the white bourgeoisie and the British imperialists, based upon the trade unions, peasant organisations etc. developing systematically the leadership of the workers and The Communist Party in this organisation".

The difference between this resolution and the main resolution adopted by the 6th congress is at once apparent. Whereas the main resolution calls merely for the "creation of an independent native republic, with simultaneous guarantees for the rights of the white minority", the special resolution on the South African question called for "an independent native South African republic as a stage towards a workers' and peasants' republic, with full equal rights for all races, black, coloured and white".

This addition of a socialist perspective to the slogan on the objectives of the national liberatory movement reflects the struggle over the "native republic" issue which occurred in the Communist Party of South Africa from the moment that the first draft was received by them in 1927. In his first reaction, Bunting reported to the Comintern that "at our party conference at the end of 1927 the proposal had a mixed reception", and it was resolved to defer discussion until after la Guma and Gumede had returned from Europe. But in the course of setting out his preliminary objections to the "native republic" slogan, Bunting provided one explanation of why the majority of the South African CP members were lagging in their approach to the national question.

"The basis claimed for the slogan", said Bunting, "is no doubt Lenin's famous thesis on colonial affairs adopted at The Second Congress of the CI in 1920. *Unfortunately it has been impossible to obtain a copy of this thesis to refer to*" (My italics.) Bunting added that his sole knowledge of the thesis was derived from quotations which - "are believed to be correct" - presumably incorporated in the work of other writers. It is as well to bear in mind that, although Marxist writings were slowly spreading through the colonial world, the South African Party appears to have been framing its policies on the national question without full access to the vital discussions which had been going on in the Comintern for the previous seven years.

At any rate, when the slogan was formally discussed at that CEC meeting in Johannesburg on March 15, 1928, the ECCI's draft was supported in discussion by la Guma, Douglas Wolton and his wife Molly, but opposed by V. Danchin, E.S. Sachs, B. Weibren, Gana Makabeni and Thibedi, who dubbed it "Garveyism" and racialistic.

According to the minutes, even Wolton admitted that the thesis was open to misunderstanding and that its acceptance at that stage would endanger the party.

The main protagonists in the argument, Bunting and Wolton, presented statements of their views at the meeting of the CEC held on May 10, 1928. Bunting's statement opposing the ECCI's draft was supported by 8 votes to 2 but it was decided that both the majority and minority reports should be sent to the Communist International. At an earlier meeting on May 3, when it came to choosing between Bunting and Wolton to represent South Africa at the 6th congress, the CEC split 4 - 4, but at a later meeting on May 3, Bunting was elected by 6 votes to 3. It was also decided to send as a delegate E.R. Roux, who was then a student at Cambridge University in England and who had been prominent in the foundation and development of the Young Communist League in Johannesburg before he went overseas. It was also agreed that Rebecca Bunting, who was a member of the CEC and planned to accompany her husband to Moscow, should also be a delegate.

The differences between the majority and minority reports are instructive. Bunting's 30-page statement reflects his detailed knowledge of the political movement in South Africa, based on years of painstaking work up and down the Witwatersrand and in country areas of the Transvaal, carrying the Communist Party flag into practically every African township and location. The "native republic" slogan, he said, would have a negative effect on both black and white in South Africa.

"The policy of the CP in South Africa has always been to *split the whites on class lines* and stress the fundamental community of interest of white proletarians and semi-proletarians with the blacks - we could not agree to any weakening or abandonment of this policy, and we therefore quarrel somewhat with the wording of the resolution where it says that there will be an ever sharper 'division of interests between the black and white population', i.e. treated as one whole, without class discrimination".

The idea of white and black comradeship against the ruling class had been a genuine inspiration to the blacks, especially in the rural areas, "and the demand for visits from white speakers (among others) is continuous, so great is the contrast they present with the usual white arrogance on the one hand and ICU avarice and fire-eating on the other".

Bunting's main argument was that it was through the class struggle, and the achievement of socialism under the leadership of the Communist Party that national liberation and the ending of all forms of national and race discrimination and oppression could be achieved.

"The class banner is in fact today inspiring more revolutionary enthusiasm than the

racial banner", he said, citing as an example the action of tailoring workers in Germiston where 300 white girls and 100 native men had gone out on strike together. "For the first time in history, we believe, whites and natives have come out on strike together on the Rand . . . This co-operation is our work. It is making reactionary trade unionists think seriously"

(During 1928 the two racially separate tailoring workers' unions, one black and one white, were amalgamated into one union, and Bunting was able to claim in his speech to the 1928 Comintern congress that this historic achievement was testimony to the soundness of the Party's line on the national question.)

Bunting's report stated that he had no confidence in the national movement.

"Although the indignation at 'white' oppression, as indeed the oppression itself, is growing, yet in our view the strictly nationalist stage of native consciousness, in as far as it ever existed in that form, is not a growing force but a declining one; it is being played out, as in other countries such as China, in favour of the class movement (witness the early popularity of the ICU as compared with the Congress); and the attempt to revive it or create it would be to strive against nature and history."

There was no native bourgeoisie in South Africa to spearhead a national democratic revolution. The Africans were "all helotised together".

"As our first leaflet on native unity said in 1918 'Let there be no Zulu, Basuto or Shangaan; unite as workers, unite!' and this leaflet had an enormous influence in South Africa, and from its slogan originated the whole South African native labour movement, including the ICU,'. Indeed, the ICU, said Bunting, "has a greater expectation of life than the ANC because its foundation is class rather than race unity".

Bunting's failure to appreciate the revolutionary potential of the national movement was reflected in his discussion of the strategy and tactics open to the movement.

"We cannot see much hope of success for an armed native rising for the present", his statement said. "The main weapons available to the SA Natives today are still only agitation, demonstration, continual pressure of protest on the Government, continual confrontation of it with publication of facts which no ruling class dare defend, strikes, boycotts, elections etc. all aiming at a certain paralysation of the will of the ruling class to persist in its unblushing and brutal oppression in face of nation-wide outcry and resistance

To the battle-hardened revolutionaries at the 6th Congress in Moscow, this line must have seemed little better than reformism. By contrast, Wolton's 14-page statement, though disclosing far less acquaintance with the practical problems of organisation and action in South Africa (understandable perhaps since he had come to South Africa from England only in 1921, and had been involved in Communist Party politics for an even shorter period) had a revolutionary content which was lacking in the majority statement. National movements in colonial and semi-colonial countries are of paramount importance, for "*national independence is incompatible with world imperialism*", he said.

"The levelling process of capitalist economics is proceeding; the native worker is swamping the industrial life of the country; today, the unskilled spheres, but tomorrow the skilled spheres also..." He quoted official figures that 300,000 Africans were permanently urbanised, "completely proletarianised".

"It becomes increasingly clear that as the mass of native workers advance to the struggle, the white workers function proportionately less as a revolutionary factor in the class struggle in South Africa".

Black unity was important in the struggle against white domination. "The common helotry of all Non-Europeans is sufficient assurance of the ultimate complete unity between Native, Malay, Coloured and Indian.

"The slogan of a South African Native Republic is clearly a challenging cry from the vast majority of the proletariat to sweep away the privileged minority positions occupied by the white workers with the added addendum that they (the white workers) shall take their just and equal stand in The working class movement as a whole. The call to the native proletariat as embodied in the slogan will give birth to a sense of power as a national class unit'

While conceding Bunting's criticism of the ANC as having "no very definite policy or activity, either political or economic, at the moment", Wolton added: "Nevertheless it has always remained dimly as an expression at least of the desire of the African people to control their own destinies". ANC activities "reveal a conscious desire of the African people to one day possess power and constitute a very strong national expression of the people towards independent action".'

As for the ICU, whereas Bunting had seen it as originating in the desire for class rather than national unity, Wolton held that "the main-spring of its astounding development was its appeal to the national sentiments of the African people". The ICU organ *Worker's Herald*, he pointed out, bore the slogan "Your own paper, devoted to your own interests, in your own languages".

The CP majority were wrong to place their faith in working class unity, said Wolton. "Effective unity between black and white worker cannot be contemplated seriously until power is in the hands of the working class in this country". It was native mass organisation which would win the white workers' respect and possible neutrality or even support

Bunting had held that the "native republic" slogan would automatically antagonise all whites, including the workers, and could lead only to a racial war which would indefinitely postpone the socialist revolution. This did not dismay Wolton.

"A so-called racial war", he said, "could never mean anything else than a struggle led by the industrial proletariat for liberation from white domination, from white control of the means of life, mines, factories land etc. and as such, the struggle, by whatever 'unpopular' name it may be called, must be supported and fostered by the revolutionary movement"

Wolton also placed The South African revolution firmly in its international context, and emphasised the importance of the native republic slogan for the anti-imperialist movement in the whole African continent.

At the sixth congress of the CI, the South African majority view, as reflected in Bunting's statement, was, of course, in the minority; whereas the minority view expounded in Wolton's report coincided with the view of the congress as a whole. In an attempt to reach a compromise, the South African delegation proposed through Bunting an amendment to the "native republic" slogan reading: "an independent workers' and peasants' South African republic with equal rights for all toilers irrespective of colour, as a basis for a native government". But this, too, proved unacceptable, and the slogan was finally adopted in the form set out in the resolution adopted by the Executive Committee of the Comintern and published in the *Communist International*, Vol. VI, No.2, of December 15, 1928.

An interesting sidelight on the 6th congress is that in his speech on August 16, E.R. Roux presented a view of The South African situation which in one respect strikingly anticipates the programme adopted by the South African Communist Party at its fifth national conference in 1962. Roux said: "We can regard South Africa as a miniature edition of the British Empire. Here we have a white bourgeoisie and a white aristocracy of labour living in the same country together with an exploited colonial working class and also an exploited colonial peasantry. Here the participation of the workers of the ruling class in the exploitation of the colonial workers is very apparent. That does not mean that the British workers do not share in the exploitation of the Indian workers, but on an international field it does not become

so obvious as when the exploitation occurs in the confines of a single country as it does in South Africa".

A similar concept was incorporated in the 1962 programme of the SACP which described South Africa as a country based on "colonialism of a special type" in which "the oppressing white nation occupied the same territory as the oppressed people themselves and lived side by side with them".

But there the similarity ends. While Roux stressed the class factor; the SACP in 1962 placed the emphasis on the national revolution.

Roux asked: "Must The Communist Party stress in its propaganda the parasitical nature of the white workers, even the poor and unemployed whites? Must it stress the parasitical nature of the British workers as sharers in the exploitation of the Indians? No. Rather you would say, we should stress the unity of the workers irrespective of colour, in an attack upon capitalism".

The SACP programme of 1962 also stressed that "the fundamental interests of all South African workers, like those of workers everywhere, lie in unity: unity in the struggle for the day-to-day interests of the working class, for the ending of race discrimination and division, for a free, democratic South Africa as the only possible basis for the winning of socialism, the overthrow of the capitalist class and the ending of human exploitation

But, it went on, "only the complete emancipation of the non-white peoples can create conditions of equality and friendship among the nationalities of South Africa and eliminate the roots of race hatred and antagonism which are the greatest threat to the continued security and existence of the white population itself. The national liberation of the non-whites which will break the power of monopoly capitalism is thus in the deepest interest of the bulk of the whites. Progressive and far-seeing whites ally themselves unconditionally with the struggle of the masses of the people for freedom and equality.... The immediate and imperative interests of all sections of the South African people demand . . . a national democratic revolution which will overthrow the colonialist state of white supremacy and establish an independent state of national democracy in South Africa. The main content of this revolution is the national liberation of the African people."

The resolution on the South African question adopted by the 6th Congress of the Comintern in 1928 laid the theoretical foundation for the work of the Communist Party of South Africa in the ensuing decades and its importance cannot be overemphasised. At the same time, the immediate consequence was a period of confusion and uncertainty in the ranks of the Communist Party. Although the

majority of the members of the Communist Party Central Executive had supported Bunting's statement, they now found themselves bound by point 16 of the 21 points concerning the conditions of admission to the Comintern, which stated in part: "All the resolutions of the congresses of the Communist International as well as the resolutions of the Executive Committee are binding for all parties joining the Communist International".

After he had left the Party, Roux was at pains to make out that the Native Republic resolution was imposed on The South African Communist Party from outside by a Comintern concerned more with the furtherance of its own interests and those of its biggest constituent element the Russian CP than with the interests of the South African people. This is to misunderstand both the constitutional and the fraternal relationship between the Comintern and its constituent parts. True, the executive of the South African CP had voted for the Bunting statement, while the Comintern had endorsed what might be described as an elaborated version of the Wolton line. But the eventual Native Republic resolution flowed from an interchange of views between the Comintern and the CPSA, and was accepted in South Africa in terms of the policy of democratic centralism on which the international Communist movement was based. Certainly, there is no doubting that the impetus for the Native Republic resolution came from the nationally-minded elements in the South African CP, as indicated in correspondence between la Guma and the Executive Committee of the Comintern before the 1928 Congress of the CI.

In a report sent to The ECCI in December 1927, la Guma wrote: "The resolution on South Africa submitted by the ECCI had not received the approval of the Central Executive. Judging from the arguments advanced against the resolution 'that it was drawn up by people with insufficient knowledge of South African affairs', especially the extreme backwardness and widespread apathy of the native masses; that they are such easy prey to rogues and charlatans that they will make a mess of it; that the white worker after all has the first say in such questions etc. etc . . . it is easily seen that the boot is on the other foot, since these arguments are abundantly refuted by everyday facts..."

After citing examples of growing militancy and strike action on the part of the blacks in South Africa, la Guma went on: "The argument that the movement depends to a large extent if not solely upon the European workers does not carry much weight if we bear in mind the opposition on the part of the rank and file European labour to co-operation with Blacks, and their further realisation that their privileges and concessions are obtained at the expense of the Black workers.

"These arguments drive the non-European comrades to the conclusion that the Central Executive of the South African Party considers the mass movement of the

natives should be held up until such time as the white worker is ready to extend his favour. Needless to say, the entire non-European membership of the Cape Town branch and all Europeans, with one exception heard so far, are for The ECCI resolution . . .

Once the Comintern Congress had taken its decision, the South African Communist Party, as a constituent element, voted to accept it. A report dated September 20, 1929, drawn up by Wolton as secretary of the CPSA for submission to the Comintern described the proceedings of the 7th annual conference of the CPSA held earlier in the year. There were 18 native delegates and 10 white, representing an aggregate membership of 3,000 of whom only 300, however, were in financial standing. The report states: "During the discussion on the CI resolution, which lasted for a whole day, practically all the delegates participated. The whites for the most part opposed the resolution, partly through unclear understanding and the rest through a social democratic outlook. The native delegates, whilst not following all the intellectual hairsplitting of some of the white delegates, supported the resolution on race grounds. Ultimately the resolution was put, and only four votes were cast against . . . Since the conference it can be said that some of those against the resolution have come over and now support the Party line."

Superficially, the unity of the Party was maintained. Bunting and most of the adherents of the former majority line accepted the decision of the 6th congress and loyally carried it out. Bunting was elected chairman of the Party executive and Wolton secretary, with an African Albert Nzula as assistant secretary. Bunting and Wolton both stood as party candidates in the 1929 general election, Bunting getting 289 votes in Tembuland and Wolton 93 in the Cape Flats. Both had placed the "independent native republic" slogan at the heart of their appeal to the electorate.

But beneath the surface, personal antagonism between Bunting and Wolton and their supporters, as well as ideological confusion continued. Wolton himself, in his report on the 1929 congress, was to show that lack of clarity about the relationship between the class and national struggles was not confined to the "Buntingites". Referring to the white trade unions in which CP members were active, he said: "It is in this section of Party work that the right wing danger reveals itself most clearly, when under spurious slogans of unity of black and white workers, the revolutionary workers tend to lose their independence and become an appendage of the reformist machine."

Spurious slogans? Yet the ECCI resolution on the South African question had urged: "The Communist Party must continue to struggle for unity between black and white workers.... It must explain to the native masses that the black and white workers are .not only allies, but are the leaders of the revolutionary struggle of the native masses

against the white bourgeoisie and British imperialism

There was also confusion over the meaning of "independent native republic" and "national movement". Recalling Stalin's definition of a nation as "a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture", party members argued about its application in South Africa. Was there a single African nation, or were there a number of distinct nations (Xhosa, Zulu, Shangaan etc.)? Was a national group or a tribe the same thing as a nation? The extent to which confusion existed in party circles may be gauged from the fact that as late as December 1931, at a meeting of the Central Committee of the CPSA in Johannesburg, Molly Wolton proposed "The substitution of our slogan Federation of Independent Native Republics for The previous slogan of a South African Independent Native Republic". She went on to explain: "Analysing the work of the Party and the conditions in South Africa, it was felt by the Communist International that an independent Native Republic as applied to South Africa where we have various tribes with different languages, different traditions and customs and to a certain extent different culture, would not meet the situation and therefore the CI discussed this question very fully and very exhaustively and came to the conclusion that in order to ensure a greater unity between the exploited and oppressed people in South Africa in their fight for national independence and land and against imperialism it was necessary that the various tribes in this country should have a full understanding of what a South African Republic would mean; whether it would mean the domination of one tribe by another, whether it would mean that the Zulus would be the dominating people in the SA Native Republic or whether another tribe . . ."

The slogan of a Federation of Independent Native Republics, she said, was based on the experience of the Soviet Union, which had more tribes than South Africa, and which had shown that only in this way could the Communist Party gain the confidence of the masses. "We must show them that we have no intention of imposing on any one tribe, but instead grant them independence and even fight for their independence". Only by working for a Federation of Independent Native Republics could the CP gain "the fullest unity of all native tribes living in South Africa to fight against imperialism"

The new slogan was argued over by the delegates at the Central Committee meeting. Edwin Mofutsanyana and John Gomas supported it, Nchie opposed it - supporters and opponents cut across colour lines; but eventually it was adopted as official South African Party policy, until the threat of fascism and war in the later thirties swept the whole Native Republic issue into the background and placed the burning need to form an anti-fascist, anti-war united front at the top of the Party agenda.

Even during the war, however, echoes of The Native Republic controversy continued to be heard. Writing on "The National Question in the Soviet Union" in the CP organ *Freedom/Vryheid* dated November 7, 1940, Moses Kotane maintained that, just as in the Soviet Union, the national problem in South Africa would be solved under socialism.

"Socialism will bring Non-Europeans political freedom, and economic and social development", he wrote. "It will do away with economic competition and fear by making it possible for everybody to get a job.

"There are predominantly African areas where, with the addition of more land, African republics may be set up. Industries could be established in those areas, agriculture put on an economic footing; towns, schools and training institutions built".

This raised again the question of whether there was one African nation or many, and Kotane referred to the problem of language.

"The language question would form one of the main difficulties. There is no one language which is sufficiently known and spoken by a majority of the people of Africa. Zulu is spoken mainly in Natal; Xhosa in the Eastern Cape; Sutho in Basutoland and in some parts of the Free State; Tswana in Bechuanaland, western and north-western Transvaal, in some parts of the Cape, and in some parts of the Free State. And then there are Sepedi, Tshivenda and Shangaan in the eastern and the northern Transvaal. Neither English or Afrikaans is widely spoken among Africans.

"So, while in each republic or national area everything would be conducted in the language of its people, there still remains the problem of the official national language to be solved. Nevertheless, this could be settled by the common consent of all".

It is significant to bear in mind, in this context, that the language in which proceedings have been conducted at all national conferences of the African National Congress has been English, with translations into Sechuana or Sesutu and Zulu or Xhosa.

One African nation or many? One "Native Republic" or several? It is perhaps unfortunate that argument over the Comintern's 1928 resolution on the South African question should have centred on the Native Republic slogan. As an attempt to characterise the nature of the state which would emerge from the national democratic revolution, the slogan was misleading and perhaps premature. Above all, the Native Republic slogan did not adequately embody the main content of the

resolution, which was to stress that the Communist Party of South Africa had to study and apply the correct Marxist-Leninist policies on the national question, and to understand the revolutionary potential of the national liberation movement led by the national organisations of the oppressed black majority. In this sense, though the Native Republic slogan may have disappeared from view in the course of time, the 1928 resolution brought about a permanent and beneficial change in Communist thinking and practice on the national question, paving the way ultimately for the tremendous advances registered by both the Party and the liberation movement in later decades.

Course: National Democratic Revolution

12033, Bunting, Moses Kotane, 1975, C2, The National Question, Part 2

13887 words